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SUBJECT: TWO MAJOR PRISON RIOTS IN HONDURAS IN LESS THAN A  
WEEK

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 98

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James Williard, reasons 1.4 (b a  
nd d)

¶1. Summary: On April 27 a riot broke out in San Pedro Sula penitentiary and 9 inmates were killed. The fight was between "paisas" (non-gang members) and "pesetas" (ex-gang members). Less than a week later, prison authorities began transferring inmates to other prisons throughout Honduras to prevent further violence in San Pedro Sula. In the early hours of May 4, 18 of 31 "pesetas" transferred to Tamara National Penitentiary on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa were massacred by "paisas." According to police contacts, there were no gang members involved in any of these killings, either as perpetrators or as victims. No American citizen prisoners in either of the institutions were affected. The prison system in Honduras is dysfunctional and it was just a matter of time before the typical, everyday violence of the last couple of years escalated into something bigger, as has happened in the past. End summary.

¶2. (C) On April 27, a riot broke out in San Pedro Sula penitentiary. It started when a "peseta" (ex-gang member) shot a "paisa" (non-gang member or common criminal) with a 38 caliber pistol, thereby breaking the non-aggression pact between the two groups. The wounded inmate was taken to the hospital and died minutes later. This angered the "paisas" who began attacking "pesetas" indiscriminately, while the already heavily overpopulated prison was overflowing with visitors (friends and family members of inmates, including children). The attacks were perpetrated with machetes and other sharp objects. Nine "pesetas" were killed and several others wounded. Fortunately none of the visitors were hurt. The Prison Director, Nazir Lopez, was temporarily suspended pending an investigation and several days later was reinstated by the Minister of Security, Jorge Alberto Rodas Gamero. (Comment: Post knows this Prison Director and believes him to be an honest official trying to do an impossible job. End comment.) The press is reporting that the initial confrontation in San Pedro Sula started as a fight over a woman, member of the MS-13 street gang, however the Prisons Inspector told PolOff that this is just a supposition and that another possibility is that the fight was over money. The investigation is still in progress.

¶3. (U) On the evening of April 29, one of the "paisa" leaders was moved from San Pedro Sula penitentiary to a prison in the city of La Ceiba on the north coast. According to Inspector of Prisons, Gustavo Bustillo, the other "paisas" started making noise and throwing rocks, so the prison guards fired what they later called "preventive" shots into the air. Nothing further happened that night and the prison officials complied with the prisoners' demand to bring the "paisa" leader back from La Ceiba to San Pedro Sula. The penitentiary in San Pedro Sula is located in the middle of the city, and

after the April 27 riot, neighbors were concerned that another one had broken out when they heard more shots. The police spent a good part of April 30 doing rumor control.

¶4. (U) On May 1, the press started reporting that "pesetas" were going to be transferred from San Pedro Sula to prisons throughout the country. No timetable was given and the specific arrangements were kept quiet. On the morning of May 3, the quiet was broken when it was reported that 18 of the 31 "pesetas" that had been transferred late on May 2 to National Penitentiary Marco Aurelio Soto, commonly known as Tamara and located just outside of Tegucigalpa, had been murdered by "paisas" with machetes and knives overnight within the walls of the prison. The press reported the General Directorate for Criminal Investigation (DGIC) commented that the massacre at Tamara was ordered by inmates in San Pedro Sula as revenge for the killing of the "paisa" there.

¶5. (C) After the Tamara riot, victims' family members are accusing the police of knowing exactly what was going to happen. It is not uncommon for transfers to Tamara prison to be violent and they say that their relatives expressed fear for their lives at the prospect of moving to Tamara. The press and public are demanding to know why this was allowed to occur. The new Director of Prisons, Antonio Martinez, was quoted as saying "We don't have a magic wand to guarantee the life of prisoners." The headline of a major Tegucigalpa daily on Sunday was "They Were Brought to Their Deaths." A San Pedro Sula newspaper reported that "pesetas" received anonymous death threats from Tamara before they were transferred. Inspector of Prisons Bustillo told PolOff that the prison transfer was indeed done under heavy security, and

that the decision to move "pesetas" to Tamara was taken jointly in discussions with the human rights prosecutors. He explained that the newly transferred prisoners spent the night of May 2 in cells in Tamara, and when all prisoners were let out of their cells at 6:15 a.m. as part of the daily routine, the massacre started, lasting a mere three minutes. This appeared to be a coordinated attack, with murders taking place simultaneously in different modules. Before the transfer, the prison officials spoke with the unofficial inmate leaders of the different modules, who pledged not to generate violence. (Comment: Post believes that prison officials used this tactic to cover themselves, but we do not think they actually trusted the inmate leaders. Senior government officials may well have expected the violence to occur. End comment.)

¶6. (SBU) Overall, more than 150 "pesetas" were transferred from San Pedro Sula to prisons in El Progreso, Copan, Tela, Puerto Cortes, and Ocotepeque. Tamara was the only prison that rioted. Inspector of Prisons Bustillo told Post that the 13 survivors of the Tamara transfer are being taken to a newly built prison in Juticalpa, Olancho, that will be "inaugurated" with their arrival and the arrival of other prisoners from throughout the country. He said they want to "start fresh" and make Juticalpa a model prison with strict security measures, which they will make known to Post.

¶7. (U) Post's Consular Agent visited the one American prisoner in San Pedro Sula following the April 27 riot. The American reported that despite the chaos of the riot, he had not felt threatened and had no concerns for his ongoing security. Post will make phone contact with the four American prisoners at Tamara penitentiary, but none have reported any involvement in the May 4 massacre.

¶8. (C) Comment: As newspaper headlines over the past week emphasize, the prison system in Honduras is a "time bomb." Organized crime is directed from within the prisons and the GOH has little control over what happens inside. Prisoners in Honduras have easy access to weapons, which are usually brought in by visitors, or in the case of San Pedro Sula prison, just thrown over the wall from the outside. With INL funding and projects, Post is starting to assist the Ministry of Security to improve safety and security in the prisons.

INL Senior Corrections Advisor Donald Stolworthy assessed San Pedro Sula and Tamara prisons in February and developed a comprehensive plan for assistance. Since then, the Prison Director at Tamara was replaced in March, as were the Director of Prisons and Prison Inspector. Post is working with the new officers assigned to these key positions, but the frequent rotations highlight the difficulty of following through on such an urgent and serious problem. While Post believes the Minister of Security truly wants to gain control of the prison situation, the lack of continuity may be indicative of a lack of political will at a higher level. Over the past few days, President Zelaya has publicly put himself in the middle of a controversy regarding the Attorney General's Office that is fomenting chaos and may lead to a constitutional crisis. The chaos in the prison system is like putting gas on the fire. End comment.  
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